

# **Bike Me**

by Julia Smillie

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On Wednesday morning, I find myself stranded. I am stuck at the bottom of a steep hill, a looming incline, staring up at the precipice with fear and anxiety. I need to reach the summit. Not for glory, but for survival. You see, my house is near the top of this hill and I am afraid that if I try this, if I try to ride my foster bike up there, I will die.

Instead, I circle the neighborhood, and am baffled and frustrated by the geographical logic: if I stick with streets that are flat or downhill, they will never, ever lead me home. Finally, I realize I may have to give up. I may die here, at the bottom of the street. My husband will come home from work, wonder where his spouse is and perhaps send out a search party.

What I am left with is a lot of time on my hands, time in which I have no choice but to recall the events of the previous weeks. To ruminate and mull over the ideas and actions that brought me to this place – stuck at the bottom of the street, straddling a bike that I swear does not care for me one bit.

This will shock you, I know, but I am no expert bike rider. In fact, I am somewhat new to bike riding. I mean, I know how to ride a bike. I learned as a child; you had to, or you'd get beaten up. But what I know about riding a bike as an adult you could fit into...something really small. What I know about this sport, if you will, is more in theory. Okay, it's actually downright fantasy. It's been more than 20 years since I pedaled a bike and I think that I am beginning to understand why.

I got here the way most people make their way to similarly helpless fates: sin. Envy, if you're getting particular about it. You see, for more than a year now I've been consumed with bike envy. I have friends who bike and the idea of spending free time in such a wholesome, healthy pursuit was appealing to me. I mean, what if I could actually move beyond loathing exercise and adopt a hobby that would keep me fit, give me new social outlets?

I liked the idea of riding a bike or, more specifically, of being a person who rides a bike much as I like the idea of being someone who eats only organic foods. But the reality is far different from my fantasy. It nearly always requires dedication, commitment and effort – none of which I excel at.

In retrospect, if I had to pinpoint the moment when my plan went awry, I would have to say it was when I took the notion of becoming a bike rider a step further than I usually tote my self-improvement schemes. I spoke of it aloud. To other people. This is almost never a good idea, as someone might a) listen and b) take you seriously.

One of the people to whom I expressed my desire to be a Bike Rider was my good friend Margaret, who is an avid cyclist, but not in a she'd-kick-my-ass way...more like a man, she'd-

be-fun-to-ride-with-sort-of-way. I told Margaret that I was thinking of buying a bike and that was when I discovered that her enthusiasm for riding bordered on insanity and unbridled obsession. The woman owned not one but two of the requisite contraptions – and she very generously offered to lend me one of hers. “That way, you can see if you like it first,” she said.

It seemed like a cautious, prudent approach and, therefore, one that didn’t really appeal to me. Although Margaret did raise a good point: what if I didn’t like it? The thought hadn’t occurred to me. Of *course* I would like it! I’d already invested entirely too much time imagining what my bike-ful life would be like. I couldn’t afford not to like it.

I was already married to visions of cycling along country trails, inhaling lungful after lungful of fresh air and marveling at the wildlife frolicking in the fauna. Then there would be the lengthy Sunday rides through the near-deserted streets of downtown St. Louis, where I would develop an even stronger affinity with my community, an increased sense of civic pride with every push of the pedal. All of this, naturally, would be followed by a biking tour of Europe. Otherwise, what was the point?

Still, I had to admit Margaret knew a thing or two about bikes, so I agreed to take on the care and custody of Claire, my foster bike. I brought her to her new home on a Saturday and could barely contain myself from taking her out for a spin immediately. However, it was about 8,000 degrees outside and that pretty much swayed me. We would have to wait.

And we did. We waited nearly 48 hours before my husband and I gathered in the driveway for Claire’s inauguration. I managed to wheel her out of the garage without hitting our car, the wall or even a doorway. Things were looking good. They got better. The first time I mounted Claire, I scored a small victory: I did not fall off. I did, however, manage to steer myself right into our backyard and discovered quickly why, while it may be the preferred coating for the Wimbledon set, virtually none of the Tour de France takes place on grass.

What puzzled me most of all were the toe holder thingies. I couldn’t figure out how on earth I was supposed to get both feet in them while remaining upright on the bike. “I think you have to start with one foot in and then just kinda flip the pedal over and put your foot in the other one once you get going,” my helpful husband noted. Yeah, I was about to flip something at him, but it wasn’t the pedal. Lucky for him, I wasn’t steady enough to risk pulling my hand off the handlebar.

Before I knew it I had made the leap: from the driveway to the street. I had one foot snug in the toe thingie and the other one, well, not. There I was, riding down my street, trying to avoid pot holes and wondering how on earth I was supposed to flip anything around when it hits me: a red car.

Okay, it didn’t hit me – and I didn’t actually hit it, either. But we came very close to one another and it would have been a much more frightening encounter had the vehicle not been, you know, parked and turned off at the time. At the end of the street, I realized there was a lot to know about bike riding and that I’d probably done enough fieldwork for one day.

After my maiden voyage, my husband felt it necessary to comment on my effort. Or, not so much my effort, but my appearance during said effort. “You just look so cute on your little bike,” he said. There are many ways I appeared in my fantasies as a bike rider – strong, athletic, powerful. Not cute, like a little baby chicken!

Still, I wouldn’t let his misguided attempt at a compliment slow down my efforts. No, I was committed to this and by day two, I had sealed my commitment by circling the block. “Now who’s cute?” I thought, somewhat smugly.

But it is that can-do attitude that got me here, at the bottom of my street, stuck at the base of this hill. Okay, maybe it’s not quite a hill. But it’s an incline, dammit! It’s an incline and even after four whole days of practice, practice, practice, my thighs and knees still ache. My ass hurts from the less than generous surface area of the bike seat. I’m sweating in a highly indelicate manner and, frankly, not enjoying myself.

It occurs to me that maybe this will take more time. Is it possible that it could take more than a week for me to master this simple contraption? Is it possible that I underestimated the hard work, knowledge, dedication and commitment of the friends I imagined “effortlessly” riding their bikes in the park, on trails, down city streets?

Finally, I admit defeat, dismounting and starting to walk Claire up the incline. I have no other choice. It’s been more than an hour since breakfast and we could wind up having to eat one another if we stay away from the house much longer. Yeah, I’m thinking maybe my days on the bike are over. But is it possible that I’ll pull Claire out tomorrow and, for some insane reason, give it yet another go? Yeah. Yeah, it’s possible.